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ABSTRACT

It might be argued that due to a lack of screening and to the large lecture format of basic courses in liberal arts, a substantial number of students currently enrolled in advertising courses beyond the principles course level do not have the necessary skills, talents, or temperaments to be successful in the field. Several techniques can be employed in the principles course that may assist in screening out truly unqualified students. The first step is to establish a serious professional tone by presenting a very complete and precise syllabus, employing an assigned seating system, and establishing an absence policy. The second step is devising discriminating tests, machine graded programs, and accompanying test answer sheets that allow for 10 possible answers, rather than the standard five. A third step is exposing students early to the realities of the profession by assigning required reading from "Advertising Age," and by placing conference calls to key advertising professionals to allow students to understand better how instantaneously information must be gathered, analyzed, and acted upon. A fourth step is alerting students to the need for a broad-based liberal arts education, using short quizzes intended to point out to students how limited their knowledge is in certain basic disciplines (math or writing) important to anyone entering advertising or a related field. Finally, requiring a written project (in the form of a mini ad campaign) will allow an instructor and students to see how well the students can apply and bring together all the elements covered in the class and how well they can express themselves. (HTH)

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ADVERTISING DIVISION

THE PRINCIPLES COURSE:

A NEED TO IMPROVE ITS ABILITY TO SCREEN OUT OR DISCOURAGE UNQUALIFIED PROSPECTIVE AD MAJORS

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In many respects the principles course is much like fraternity or sorority rush. It's an opportunity for an advertising program to attract and impress prospective majors, to screen those prospects and, at the same time, allow the prospective majors to observe the program before committing themselves to an academic field.

The attracting/impressing role of the class is an important consideration to keep in mind in developing a principles course since at most schools the principles course represents the first exposure students have to the field. This is the case for several reasons. Few high schools teach advertising in their social studies classes. Few ad programs recruit high school seniors as actively as some other academic areas, e.g., engineering. And, few parents know enough about the advertising business to encourage their sons and daughters to consider it as a career. So, while many other professional and pre-professional academic areas are familiar to students prior to enrolling in college, advertising is not a well known academic option. Thus, the principles course in advertising probably plays a larger role in attracting students into a program than does its counterpart in other professional academic areas.

If this assumption is correct, then one might conclude that one of the major reasons for the growth of advertising programs has been the inherent attractiveness of the principles course and its ability to convince academic "rushees" to become advertising "pledges."

But with the "pledge" class sizes ever increasing, one might also conclude that while the principles classes are doing one thing well, i.e., recruiting more students for the field, they may not be doing an effective job from the other standpoint of "rush": screening and forewarning prospective "pledges."

Too often we hear of students who, enamored by the principles course, decide to major or specialize in the area even though their abilities do not match the demands of the field. Students with marginal quantitative skills soon find themselves struggling with media planning and ad research projects; students with inadequate writing skills cannot understand why their creative projects are judged unacceptable. Yet many of these students continue in the program because to change their major or emphasis would delay their expected date of graduation.

The result is that with many unqualified students making it into the second level advertising classes, a great amount of pressure is placed on professors to maintain the overall quality of the program and the quality of instruction in individual classes. The size of post-principles skills classes becomes unmanageable. Time that could be spent with outstanding students is consumed by having to teach the rudiments of math in media and the basics of English grammar in creative. The immense success of a popular principles course has led to frustration on the part of both students and professors.

Some would quickly point out that the best way to screen out students is not the principles course but, rather, by setting some kind of "higher than overall university" entrance standards or by administering a diagnostic test involving English grammar. This writer does not disagree with that view but it should be pointed out that most methods now employed by programs to screen majors are either nonexistent or are simply based on a fixed GPA level. The 1984 edition of Where Shall I Go to College to Study Advertising reports that no more than 10 of the 86 reporting institutions have any kind of grammar or writing test that prospective advertising students must pass. Of the remaining schools, about half have no special entrance standards for advertising students;

and, the other half have entrance standards based on a set GPA level, one that is higher than the minimum level accepted by the college or university.

The striking fact is that only a few programs truly have the kind of diagnostic tests that can help assess a student's ability to succeed in the field. And, the vast majority of others that do have some kind of "special entrance standards" simply employ a GPA cut-off point. While this GPA screening device may work well at some institutions (some schools' GPA standards are extremely high), it is doubtful that it can be as useful as diagnostic tests, particularly with grade inflation as high as it is today and with most basic freshman and sophomore level courses in college being taught in large lecture sections using machine-graded tests that do no more than measure students' ability to recall information.

While there are no statistics to support the view about to be expressed, it might be argued that due to a lack of screening and due to the format of basic courses in the liberal arts today, a substantial number of students currently enrolled in advertising courses beyond the principles level do not have the necessary skills in English, math or basic analytical thinking that are necessary to be successful in the field. All that these "eligible" students have is an acceptable GPA—a GPA which in good part has been based on their ability to score well on computer-graded tests that measure one's ability to memorize rather than one's ability to conceptualize or analyze.

Now, add to this the fact that many advertising principles classes also are currently taught in large lecture sections using computer-graded tests--just like many of the basic liberal arts courses such as history, political science, psychology, economics, etc.--and you have a situation in which a substantial number of advertising students entering the post-principles skills classes arrive at that point with a false sense of security, not yet aware

that they do not possess the quantitative or qualitative skills needed in the advertising field.

The solution? There are probably any number, including the continuing efforts to establish entrance requirements that are truly predictive of success in the program. But, for those programs that currently teach the principles course in large lecture sections and have found that students who are not prepared for the field still "slip through" to the next level of courses, there are several techniques that can be employed in teaching the principles course that may assist in screening out truly unqualified students or in alerting students whose talents and temperment do not fit the field that it would be unwise for them to continue in the program.

Setting a Serious Tone. Too often principles courses are too "loose" in structure and students don't get the impression that the course is, indeed, an essential prerequisite for subsequent courses. A first step in establishing a serious, professional tone is to have a very complete and very precise syllabus. The syllabus should set down course objectives, describe learning activities, clearly explain the grading procedure and should provide students with a detailed calendar that describes the course content on a session-by-session basis, including reading assignments and test dates. An extra touch that some colleagues employ to convey the seriousness of the course is to employ a contractual-like agreement at the start of the course. The "contract," attached to the syllabus, calls for the student to sign and return a statement indicating they have read and understood the guidelines and grading procedures of the course.

Second is to employ an assigned seating system to break up cliques and reduce the chances of cheating. Students should be allowed and encouraged, however, to ask for seats in specific areas of the classroom (e.g., down front

because of vision or hearing problems, near the aisles due to feelings of claustrophobia, etc.). By separating students from friends and by employing a seating chart, two obstacles to learning in a large classroom setting have been overcome: pockets of private conversations and the cloak of anonymity.

Third is to establish an absence policy. One method is to allow a standard number of unexcused cuts but to reduce final grades by a certain number of points for each unexcused absence over the allowable. In determining what constitutes an unexcused absence, however, there should be some flexibility allowed and compassion shown. Allow students to turn in personally written excuses for those times they were ill, at a funeral, had personal problems at home, etc. Return those notes to them with an "OK" and a comment or two if applicable to let them know you're businesslike but not an automan. The main point of the absence policy is not to help establish a curve in the class but, rather, to impress upon students that in this academic program students are expected to be present--just as they would be in business. Another reason for the absence policy is to prevent students from hiring friends to take notes for them while they hold down a job during that class period. Cutting down on that practice, I've found, appeals to many students. Most of them support a policy that prevents some of their peers from passing a course in absentia by relying on the notes of a "hired" friend (or unhired fraternity or sorority pledge).

Devising Truly Discriminating Tests. Too frequently, computer-graded tests employed in large introductory sections wind up being primarily true-false exams with only a few multiple choice questions. The result is a series of test scores with limited ranges. Thus, even the weakest students are able to stay within striking distance of a C grade because the testing has not been discriminating enough. The first suggestion here is to employ machine-graded programs and accompanying test answer sheets that allow for 10 possible answers--

not the standard five that are found in most machine-graded tests. The use of the 10-foil answer sheet allows an instructor to ask truly discriminating questions. The tests do take more time to write initially but students soon realize they have to know the material extremely well--not just superficially--in order to achieve even a passing grade. An additional advantage of using a system with 10 possible answers is that it makes it more feasible to ask questions that require mathematical computation since the answer can be better masked among 10 choices. Finally, one should consider the possibility of weighting questions, giving more importance to those questions that require analytical or mathematical reasoning as opposed to questions that essentially test recall of material. Such weighting processes, too, can help to provide a broader distribution of scores.

Exposing Students Early to the Realities of the Field. Since textbooks can't easily capture the pace or tone of work in the advertising business, many students enrolled in the principles course do not realize the pressures and time demands that exist in the field. An effective way of introducing beginning students to the tone of the business is to require them to read Advertising Age, obtaining copies by bulk-rate subscriptions through the publication. While many schools already participate in this program, I'd suspect that most of the orders are placed for upper level rather than principles classes. Two suggestions are in order to make the use of Ad Age effective. First, give the students a list of assigned readings for each issue. Second, to make sure the readings are taken seriously, include questions from the readings on each exam.

Another suggestion, one that can make students dramatically aware of the complexities and time demands of the field, is to make a few timely, pre-arranged phone calls via an amplified phone hookup to key advertising professionals. For example, calling the media director of a major ad agency during the fall TV

premier week or during a sweeps period allows students to better understand how instantaneously information must be gathered, analyzed and acted upon.

There are virtually limitless ways of bringing the tone of the advertising business into the classroom. But the main point is they should be an important part of the principles course so that beginning students will sense and begin to understand early the kind of pace and pressure that exists in the field.

Alerting Students to the Need for a Broad-Based Liberal Arts Education. Unlike the previous recommendations, this suggestion is unrelated to the study of advertising itself. Rather, it's an attempt to make students realize how much their general education courses can be of value to them in the field (and, in many cases, how little they've retained from those basic courses).

It can be, however, an enjoyable part of the class if handled properly. The method is to conduct several short, informal, in-class quizzes (unannounced) called "humblers." The five-minute quizzes do not count toward the students' course grade but are instead intended to point out to students how limited their knowledge is in certain basic disciplines--disciplines that are important to anyone entering advertising or a related field. The "humblers" work like this. Students take out a blank piece of paper, placing their social security number on the top. The instructor, either verbally or with audio-visual aids, then asks a series of short questions (e.g., "What are the names of the major markets identified by numbers only on this map?") and students record their answers on the sheet. The papers are immediately turned in and, at a later date, a scoresheet is posted to let the students see how well they did compared to their peers.

Perhaps the most important part of the "humbler" exercises is the posting of "grades." It's then that the student realizes how solid or how weak his knowledge of general education topics is compared to his peers. But,

the point has been made. The student has not been embarrassed publicly yet he has been alerted to the fact that people in the advertising business are expected to be well educated--not simply mechanically prepared.

Alerting Students to Deficiencies in Math. The intent here is to make students aware of not only their weaknesses in math but also the amount of mathematical analysis required in subsequent courses and in certain career fields in advertising. If the need for a solid math background is emphasized, many students will recognize that they should not continue in the field. Here, "humblers" can sometimes be used to show students how they rank compared to their classmates. Computing ratings, shares and CPMs are easily done within the "humbler" framework. Another suggestion is to make sure that pages from a ratings book, an LNA report, and a Simmons report are projected on a screen at some point in the class to let students know what awaits them in a course in media planning.

More realistically, though, the only way to truly emphasize math is to stress statistical aspects of the field in lectures and to test students heavily on those topics. Again, the use of 10-response answer sheets make it easier to include mathematical questions in computer-graded exams. And, weighting mathematical questions more heavily than general recall questions can help convey to students the importance that the program and its instructors place on sound mathematical skills.

Alerting Students to Deficiencies in Writing. For a large lecture section, this is the most difficult challenge to be addressed. There are some minor ways that students can be reminded that their command of the language is less than acceptable such as the use of "humblers" for misspellings. But there's no shortcut way of identifying students who truly cannot organize and present their thoughts in writing. The only solution here is to adopt the next recommendation.

Making Sure Students Can "Put It All Together." In so many of today's college classes comprehensive final exams are a thing of the past. As a result, students are able to pass a course without knowing how all the parts fit together since each quiz covers a part of the course and there is no comprehensive final. The same situation, I'm sure, exists in the advertising principles course. A student may do well in one topic area but falls flat on his face in another. Yet, his overall average is high enough to make it through the course with a passing grade. More frightening, however, is the realization that many students have not learned how all the elements of advertising fit together. They have been exposed to those elements individually but it won't be until subsequent classes that they will be asked to tie those elements together.

The suggestion here is to require a written project at the conclusion of the introductory class that allows an instructor and a student to truly see: (1) how well that student can apply and bring together all the elements covered in the class; and (2) how well that student can express himself.

The recommendation is to assign students a mini ad campaign that requires their developing a new product idea, determining that product's positioning profile and prospective target market, and then developing a small-scale creative and media plan for the product including the creation of a TV storyboard and a print ad. An example of such an assignment is attached.

At first glance the project may seem unrealistic for two reasons: (1) it takes an immense amount of time to grade; (2) students won't be ready to develop a campaign on a very high level at this stage of their academic career. I would agree with both those arguments completely. At the same time, I know of no better way to help spark enthusiasm in the course material among principles students (sitting in a lecture hall and taking machine-graded tests

does not bring about the sense of accomplishment that a project does); I know of no better way to make students realize that this field is not easy; I know of no better way to weed out students who cannot reason or write well; and I know of no better way to diagnose the effectiveness of the course, i.e., learning from the projects what areas of the course were very well understood or not so well understood by the students.

The grading is a heavy load and without a teaching assistant it can be enough to convince an instructor not to make the assignment. But, if TA help is available or if the class is not too large, the grading is manageable in light of the fact that the rest of the course has been computer graded.

Conclusion. There is obviously no simple answer to screening out or discouraging those students who do not have the abilities to do well in an advertising curriculum or the advertising field, but for many programs the principles course represents the only way in which students are screened before entry into upper level skills courses. For those programs--and even for others--it may prove useful to examine the content and tone of the principles course in order to make it a better predictor for both students and faculty of a student's chance for success in the field. Hopefully, some of the recommendations presented here will prove useful to those programs trying to solve the increasingly frustrating "rush" problem of being too successful in attracting interested "pledges" but being unsuccessful in weeding out the undesirable ones.

MINI AD CAMPAIGN PROJECT

1. Develop a consumer product or service of your choice to advertise. The product/service can be a totally new concept or a competitor to existing products/services, but should be one that would be suitable for advertising in both TV and in print. Any products already on the market may not be used so check with stores to make sure you're not coming up with a product already available or one that bombed a year ago.

2. Establish a name and retail selling price for it. And, perhaps you'll choose to have it made by a name manufacturer so you don't start with a total awareness problem.

3. Describe the product throughly and explain the positioning of the product including who your competition may be and the rationale behind the need for such a product, e.g., meets a totally new customer need or would be an improvement over existing products. (Pay particular attention to the rationale and positioning and always remember to state the why.)

4. Define your target market(s) precisely in terms of their demographic profile and write a brief explanation to defend your rationale as to why the product/service would appeal to that specific group.

5. Describe the creative strategy for your product/service and defend it. Specifically, explain and provide a rationale for the following: 1) Set down your copy platform and its elements, i.e., your creative objective, benefit, support, and tone. 2) Explain the specific theme/USP to be used and why. 3) Describe what format/technique (e.g., slice of life, demonstration, etc.) will be used and why.

6. Create one 30-second TV spot in storyboard form (minimum of 8 frames). Type the audio and video copy terms on the storyboard sheets and use the proper format. (Make sure to time the audio.) The storyboard sheets (7-3/4" x 4-1/2") are by Aqua Bee and can be purchased at Varsity.

7. Write a script for a second TV commercial that would be in your campaign "pool" to show that the creative idea is big enough to spawn more than one commercial. No storyboard is necessary; just the script in proper TV script format.

8. Do two print media ads (either for a magazine or newspaper). Print the headlines, subheads, and logo on the ads, but type the body copy on separate pages, with the copy keyed to the specific graphic areas on the layouts.

9. Based on your target market selection, describe and defend which general media types you would use in the campaign (network and/or spot TV, magazines, radio, newspapers, etc.), and what specific media vehicles you'd use, e.g., what broadcast dayparts, type of program/format, specific spot TV markets, specific magazines, etc. you'd use and why.

10. Indicate when (in what month of year) the campaign will be launched and why, whether advertising will be continuous throughout the year or during certain months and why: and, mention any special type of scheduling you plan to do and why.

11. Indicate whether emphasis will be placed on any specific geographic areas and why.

Some suggestions and requests about the form of your project:

1. I would suggest you organize your campaign under the following headings

   Introduction, Product & Market Description (points 1,2,3)

   Target Market (point 4)

   Creative Strategy (points 5,6,7,8)

   Media Strategy (points 9,10,11)

2. All written material must be typed (except for headlines, logos, etc.) and should be presented in a bradded folder, not the type using a slip-spine binding. Do not put the report in plastic page holders.

3. The project should be written -- in terms of organization, style, and grammar -- in a manner expected of any junior level course.

4. Do not put your name on the project - just your social security number.

5. AND, PLEASE DO NOT TURN IN SEPARATE, MOUNTED PRINT ADS OR STORYBOADS, I.E., PUT EVERYTHING IN THE FOLDER.

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